

Speaker Jetton's Opening Address

2008 Opening Day Address

I want to take just a few moments to look back at the past because when you are in your last year you kind of look back and you wonder “have we made a difference up here?” And I will tell you, many of you weren’t here back in 2000 when I first was elected but it’s a lot different state. It’s a lot different House. And I think there are a lot of things that we as a whole, both Republicans and Democrats, can take credit for.

One thing I remember back to when I was elected - Governor Holden, to his unfortunate situation, inherited a pretty big mess to deal with budget wise. We were losing a lot of jobs and while he was governor we lost probably more jobs than any other state in the country. But I am proud to tell you we worked on tort reform, worker’s comp, unemployment, a lot of things. There was some controversy within parties but there was a lot of agreement on things within parties – stimulus packages, economic development packages. Today our state has created 90,000 new jobs and we’ve put people back to work. And in the House we can be thankful for that.

When I was elected we had a terrible budget situation. Governor Holden had to deal with it. There were no easy answers for him. And three years ago, when you elected me to be Speaker, we had a terrible budget shortfall. And now we have almost 500 to 600 million dollar surpluses. It’s a totally different budget situation that makes our life as House members, as we try to prioritize budget needs, a lot better.

Size of state government – For years our government had 65,000 state employees. Back when we took over – 62,000 state employees. Well today we have actually shrunk the size of the state bureaucracy and I think we’ve improved the delivery of services and the things that people depend on. We have less than 60,000 state employees and for the first time in anyone’s recent memory we’ve shrunk the size of state government.

Education funding - something that we all care about in both parties. We’ve actually increased education funding the last three years 452 million dollars. This last year we passed the largest education budget in the state of Missouri’s history and we did it together and I think that’s something we should be proud of.

When Governor Holden took over he had to cut higher education. He takes a lot of criticism for that but really he didn’t have a whole lot of places to turn to cut. We’ve added 74 million dollars to higher education in the last few years. Last year we put 45 million dollars into scholarships and I am proud to tell you 37,000 students got a scholarship to go to college this fall based on what we did last year. We can be proud of what we did there.

Let me tell you about transportation. You know we’ve gone from the 47th worst roads to the ninth best. We totally changed. MoDOT is now spending the third lowest administrative costs per mile. All of those things we can take credit in some of the policies we adopted here in the House. But the thing we should be most proud of is 161 fewer people died on our highways last year in the State of Missouri . And that’s a real difference for families all over.

You know last year we cut taxes for seniors and firefighters and teachers. We did that together, both Republicans and Democrats. This year 300,000 people have had their tax burden lifted just a little bit. And we still have budget surpluses even while we’ve done that. We should be proud of that.

And then something that might make my good friends on the Democrat side of the aisle happy. You know Governor Holden had to cut a lot of programs and it wasn’t programs that he wanted to cut. I know that. But we’ve increased funding for autism; for the SCHIP program by 51 million dollars; for First Steps; and something I care about – the food pantry tax credit we were able to do; and Utilicare for low-income people who need help paying utility bills. These are all things that when Governor Holden was governor, and the budget was tight, he couldn’t do. And I have to tell you, both Democrats and Republicans, the last few years we’ve been able to put money toward those programs. Some of us on the Republican side may not have been as excited about it, but you guys insisted on it and we did it and together we’ve helped a lot of people that needed help in the State of Missouri.

Now I am going to touch on one thing that might be a little more controversial – abortion. I think President Bill Clinton used to say that he wanted to make abortion safe and rare – safe and rare. Now whether you're pro-life or pro-choice, most people would like to reduce the number of abortions. And I will tell you that in the state of Missouri last year, we did the fewest number of abortions we've done in this state since 1975. And I guarantee you the abortions that were done were done in a lot safer way for those women. That is something we probably all should, and can, be proud of.

When I got elected we were the number one meth producing state in the country. And if you've got a family, or you've got kids, and you see this drug out there. We've actually lowered meth incidents in this state, since we took over and with the laws we've passed, by 55 percent. And that is impacting kids' lives every day in this state.

I think that in the House, we don't want to shortchange the Senate. We don't want to shortchange the governor. But let's be honest. In my opinion the Missouri House, the people's House; we're elected every two years, we're closest to the people more than anybody in this state. If you look at all these issues, we've produced more jobs; we've produced budget surpluses; we shrunk the size of state government; we've improved our roads; we've put more money into education; we've put more money in higher education; we've put more money into funding programs that could never have gotten money before – Utilicare, SCHIP, autism. And we've actually made our communities safer.

In my opinion, the Missouri House is the one that led these changes and made a difference. And it wasn't just Republicans and it wasn't just Democrats. It was all of us working together on these key issues.

But there's one thing I may be more proud of than all of that. And I will tell you in my last year, it's the fact that I've watched us over the last three years become better friends on both sides of the aisle. I watched the debates last year and there were only two situations that I saw on the House floor last year where members got personal and a little testy with each other. We had our debates and our disagreements but they were professional; they were honorable; they were just the way a Democracy, and I think the founding fathers, designed it to be.

You know last year we had some tragic situations. We had some members who lost their wives, their fathers, their grandfathers. And you know, on both sides of the aisle when that happened we came to the aid of those people. And they were grateful we were with them. That's what friends do. We had some situations where we had some births, new babies, some celebrations, and a few marriages. And we celebrated those times together as friends. And I guess what I'm most proud of is that we've become better friends because we can actually go out to have dinner together – which we used to not do in this building – and that we actually know about each other's families. We may disagree with each other but we know we're all trying to make this a better state.

I think that's what has allowed us to lead this state. I am so proud that we have set an example of putting the partisan differences aside and working together to solve the key issues in a professional way – not that you agree but you did it in a professional way. We really changed this state and to me that's something we should all be proud of. And I thank you because we can't do it by ourselves. It takes all of us together to do it.

Now we have a few issues – I'll talk about a few things I hope we can work on in this last year. I know it's an election year and people say you can't do as much, but I will tell you the gentleman from Jackson , LeVota district, the new minority leader; I can't tell you how many times he and I have talked on the phone this Fall and Summer. Believe it or not, a Democrat and a Republican can pick up the phone and talk about how we're going to deal with an issue. Does that mean we agree? Not always, but we at least talk about what can we do to solve a problem for people in this state.

That's what I always hoped the House could be like because I am telling you, for some of you who are new who weren't here 4, 6, 8 years ago, it was not that way. All we ever did was fight and try to get the upper hand on each other. But that's not the way the new Minority Leader is. That's not the way I am. And I know, based on what I saw last year, that's not the way any of you are.

What do I think we need to look at? I am going to start with education. We've got the 44th lowest teacher salary in the nation. And I'm going to sponsor a bill myself, and of course it's my bill so I guess I'm a little bit positive on it, but I

hope you'll join me in trying to increase the pay of our teachers and stop this teacher shortage so our kids can get a good education in the state of Missouri.

Another issue I think is very important is the teacher protection act. We've worked on it a few years. It would reduce liability for our teachers and our administrators so that they can remove the tough discipline kids out of the classroom. We've had a lot of bipartisan support in the House on it. We've had a little trouble getting it through the Senate. But I think it's something we should try to continue to push as a House and, as we always seem to do, lead the charge on making things better for educators. I think we should pass the Teacher Protection Act again this year.

Another issue we've worked together on – we've got to do something to make sure Missouri is doing what it can to stop and stem the tide of illegal immigration in American and particularly in our state.

Another issue – and if you're like me from Marble Hill or wherever you're from, particularly it seems like St. Louis – we continue to hear horror stories of the increased property taxes and how that is affecting people all over the state, particularly those on fixed incomes. I hope we can work together to get something done to relieve the property tax burden in the State of Missouri especially on our seniors.

Again, I just want to thank everyone for the way things have gone the last few years. I really can't tell you how I'm looking forward to working with each and every one of you. We've got such great people up here. And I will tell you when I was a freshman I wouldn't really have wanted people back home, or people around the state, to know how we treated each other and how we acted up here. Now I wish we could take a tour bus around this state and bring them all up here and let them see how we act because I think whether they're a Republican or a Democrat – well maybe some of our more hardcore Republicans and hardcore Democrats want us to fight a little bit more – but most Missourians would be proud and thankful for how we conduct ourselves. I just thank you for the way you treat each other each and every day we try to make this state a better place to live. Thanks

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